

agencies that are supposed to have jurisdiction over all this. They have let this go unchecked for too long and have only recently begun to take action. I must say they are not alone.

A tough approach to fraud and abuse is almost completely lacking in the Gingrich plan that Congress is considering. The \$270 billion in cuts, which was so harsh on beneficiaries and hospitals, contained a pathetically low amount for fighting fraud and abuse.

We must have zero tolerance for those who willfully cheat the Medicare system—zero. Ultimately, they are stealing money from ordinary Americans, average American families. They are stealing money away from seniors, people like Ethel Ostheller, who depend upon Medicare to help make ends meet. They are also stealing money from millions of Americans who are working today and deserve to know that Medicare will be there when it is time for all of them to retire.

In the weeks ahead, I intend to come forward with proposals to get tough on Medicare fraud. I look forward to working with a number of my colleagues, both Democrats and Republicans, to find commonsense solutions to this very serious problem.

Thank you, Mr. President.

ACTION TAKEN ON H.R. 497 VITIATED

Mr. BAUCUS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the action just taken on the second reading of H.R. 497 be vitiated.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. BAUCUS. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. DORGAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Senator from North Dakota is recognized.

Mr. DORGAN. I thank the Chair.

(The remarks of Mr. DORGAN pertaining to the introduction of S. 1597 are located in today's RECORD under "Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.")

SEARCHING FOR PROSPERITY

Mr. GRAMS. Mr. President, when Minnesotans gather to talk about the issues that matter to them most, as they did on Tuesday at their precinct caucuses, there is a common theme that weaves between nearly all of them, especially when they are speaking directly from their hearts.

They are looking for a better life.

They want a good job that pays a decent wage. They want to put enough food on the table. They want a strong roof over their heads, for many, a place they can call their own.

And after the bills have been paid, they would like a little extra at the end of the month to squirrel away in a savings account.

The most striking truth about seeking that better life is that most folks aren't doing it just for themselves. They are pursuing it for their children, too, in the hopes of offering them the best opportunities for success.

In other words, they are searching for prosperity.

It is interesting that prosperity and the struggle to achieve it has spread across the Nation to become a major theme of the 1996 presidential campaigns. The media have just begun to focus on the troubles facing working people, and the stagnating wages and high taxes that have pushed prosperity out of reach for many middle-class families.

But where have the media been? Working families have been feeling the pinch for a long time.

"Our economy is the healthiest it has been in three decades," announced President Clinton in his State of the Union Address.

Is it really? There is plenty of evidence to the contrary—and four areas are especially troublesome:

First, the economy itself has dropped to a sluggish pace. The Federal Government released new numbers just last week confirming that economic growth has slowed to a trickle, up by only nine-tenths of a percent during the last 3 months of 1995.

Second, job growth has slowed as well, to about half the rate we'd expect to see in a normal recovery.

The U.S. Labor Department says that pay and benefit increases last year saw their lowest climb in about 14 years, since the Government first began tracking these statistics.

They could, in fact, be the leanest increases since before World War II, an unfortunate trend analysts say could easily continue.

Third, wages continue to slip as Americans take home fewer and fewer dollars.

Real weekly earnings for an average worker dropped three-tenths of a percent in 1995. That means families are taking home almost \$800 a year less than they did before President Clinton was elected in 1992.

That is \$800 they no longer have to spend on necessities such as groceries, medical expenses, or insurance.

Fourth, while the economy is slowing down, taxes have accelerated.

Americans have never paid a higher percentage of their income in taxes than they are paying today.

In 1950, an average worker paid about 2 percent of his earnings to support our Federal Government. Today, an average family sends 25 percent or more of its earnings to Washington, and that does not include the additional tax burden once State and local taxes are heaped on top of that.

Now if the economy itself was not blocking the road toward prosperity,

the record high taxes alone would have done it. Together, they have proven to be a lethal combination for American families and American workers.

None of this will come as any surprise to middle-class, working Americans.

After all, they are the ones paying the taxes at the same time they watch their paychecks shrink.

But they can find some comfort in the fact that it is their anxieties—that is, the anxieties of parents hoping to eke out a better life for themselves and their children in the face of tremendous obstacles—that will perhaps become the defining issues of the 1996 elections.

It all comes down to economic growth, income, and jobs.

We know what is blocking the way, but how did the roadblock get there in the first place?

Do you remember the prank we used to pull when we were kids, when we would attach a dollar bill to the end of a fishing line and plant it in the middle of a sidewalk?

As soon as someone spied the bill and reached down to grab it, we would yank on the string, moving that dollar out of reach and leaving the poor victim embarrassed and empty-handed.

That is what the Clinton administration is doing to the middle class. They tempt working Americans with a dollar bill and the prosperity it represents, but they yank it away just as soon as somebody begins to get close to it.

Rather than offering opportunities for success, the Government has allowed working people to become trapped between falling incomes and rising taxes. Whatever you call it—the "middle-class squeeze" or the "Clinton crunch"—it is cheating the middle class out of their hard-earned dollars.

Just look at your paycheck, look at your tax forms, look at what you are paying for government, who is spending your money, and how they are spending it. In most cases, the bureaucrats have your credit card and are spending it, I believe, without any real accountability.

It should make Americans angry that much of the money they work so hard for is being wasted on programs that do not work, or plainly just cost too much.

Unfortunately, past discussions about issues like wage stagnation and economic growth have too often centered around the minimum wage or corporate profits, and that is not what working men and women care about, though.

They are interested in their net income—what is left after you take out Federal taxes, State taxes, payroll taxes. And under the Clinton administration, there has been less and less left over in your pay envelope, thanks in part to the President's tax increases and the Federal mandates that are sapping the precious resources of our job providers, businesses have been forced to keep wages lower.